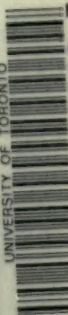


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# THE PROGRESS OF POESY

AN INAUGURAL LECTURE  
DELIVERED IN THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE  
ON THE 10TH MARCH 1906  
BY

J. W. MACKAIL

M.A., LL.D., FORMERLY FELLOW OF BALLIOL COLLEGE  
PROFESSOR OF POETRY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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THE PROGRESS OF POESY





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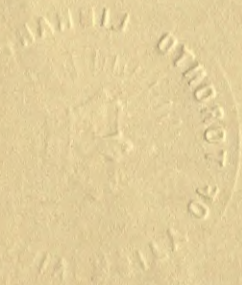
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## THE PROGRESS OF POESY

ON the 26th of December, 1754, Gray put the last touches to the famous Ode afterwards published by him under the name which I have chosen for the title of this lecture. The scheme of a history of English poetry had then already been long in his mind. Some twelve or fifteen years later he finally gave it over to the hands of a younger poet and scholar, Thomas Warton, Fellow of Trinity, who himself, just one hundred and fifty years ago, became the seventh occupant of this Chair. It has been left for Warton's distinguished successor, Mr. Courthope, to take up and carry out the scheme which had first been formulated by Pope. Gray left no contribution towards it beyond some scanty notes and the many touches of luminous criticism scattered through his correspondence. Warton, with more industry but less concentration and inferior genius, carried out only a fragment of the vast plan. But the time marked by the conjunction of the two names is one of high importance in English letters; and the poem in which Gray in a sense anticipated and summarized what he meant to be the main work of his life is significant in a twofold sense in the annals of poetry.

The *Ode on the Progress of Poesy* has, almost since its appearance, been transcribed in every anthology

of the English poets, and been familiar to every initiate in English letters. Yet it may be doubted whether here, as in other cases, the poem has not actually been obscured by its own popularity. Unlike the Elegy with which, a few years earlier, Gray had quietly entered the ranks of the immortals, the Ode is not the embodiment of thoughts and feelings as wide and as deep as humanity itself. It is the reduction into poetry, by a process of quintessential distillation, of what might at first seem matter little fitted for poetic, and least of all for lyric treatment; a history and a criticism of the art of poetry, as poetry was known and understood by one who was not only an artist of exquisite poetical faculty, but the most accomplished man of letters of his age. In it, and in the brief notes which he added to it when he gave it to the public, he included in essence his statement of what poetry is, and summed up what he conceived as being the main landmarks in its progress up to his own time. The Ode is too much read merely as a procession of stately lines and a treasury of chiselled epithets. Arnold indeed, with just insight, noted in a single sentence that its evolution must be accounted not less noble and sound than its style. But even those who appreciate its artifice of structure often fail to apprehend its full significance.

It may not then be idle, even before an audience to whom every line and every epithet of the poem has long been familiar, to emphasize the substantive thought, the body of mature criticism, which it embodies. Briefly, the architectonic design of the Ode is this: to state, in the first place, the function and power of poetry; and to indicate, thereafter, the large lines of its progress, from country to country and from



age to age, so far as it is at the writer's own day a possession, a heritage, an influencing and controlling force, a living element in life. To each of these two subjects, or rather, these two aspects of a subject which is in itself one, he devotes four strophes or sections of the Ode. The full ninefold number of the Muses is made up by an introductory section which, in language so condensed and so subtle that it may be read many times before it gives up its full meaning, anticipates and sums up his whole argument.

Being a poet, Gray does not in this prelude offer any definition of poetry. If, as it often is, it be carelessly read as a mere entanglement of metaphors, he might seem half to raise and wholly to evade the question of what poetry is. But so fine an artist could not speak of his lyre giving its strings to rapture if he were only fingering them and getting them into tune. What he really does is, by a series of extraordinarily delicate touches, to suggest, without defining, the three main bodies of classical poetry, those of Greece, Italy, and England—the springs of Helicon, the golden realm of Ceres, the rocks and groves of a more northern landscape; to suggest, without naming, the three primary types of poetry—the lyric, with its flowers set round a thousand rivulets, the deep, smooth strength of the epic, the sweep and thunder of tragedy; and to suggest, without formally laying down, the quality which, as poetry, they all have in common—that of progress, fluid movement, continuous life. After this prelude the development of the main subject of the Ode follows. In one of the noblest tributes which the worshippers of the high Muse have offered to their mistress he sets forth the power and the function of poetry: as the controller of sullen care and frantic

passion ; as the companion in youth of desire and love ; as the power which in later years dispels, or solaces where it cannot dispel, the ills of human life, labour, penury, pain, disease, sorrow, death itself ; as the inspiration, from youth to age and in all quarters of the habitable world, of the noblest human motives and passions, glory and generous shame, freedom and the unconquerable mind.

Then, by a swift transition, turning from the power and function of poetry to its history and progress, he traces (or touches rather than traces—for as before he was a poet and not a metaphysician, so here he is a poet and not a historian) the secular movement of poetry in its central life. From her splendid sunrise in Greece, through her noonday, and her other morn risen on midnoon, in ancient and mediaeval Italy, he follows the progress of Poesy to his own country ; and there, with the slightest interjected indication of the influence of the Italians on successive ages of English poets, concentrates the upward movement of his Ode on the two names of Shakespeare and Milton. The falling cadence is prolonged through a third name, inferior yet still great—that of Dryden, the moulder of heroic verse and the architect of one magnificent lyric. From Dryden's Ode on the Progress of Music he effects the transition with curious felicity to his own Ode on the Progress of Poesy, and finally claims a place for himself in that golden pomp, in a tone alike remote from doubt and from arrogance.

The progress of poetry, with its immense power and its exalted function, through human life, through the life of the individual from youth to age, through the life of mankind down that great curve of the ages of which we know too little to speak with any certainty



of its direction or its goal : this is the subject of Gray's Ode ; and this it is which must be, on one side or another, in greater or in lesser part, the subject to be dealt with from a Chair of Poetry, according to the scope and measure in which each successive occupant feels himself called on or qualified to speak. In such a field there may be bewilderment of choice, but never any exhaustion of subject. Gray's own tone is often that of one born, as Milton nearly a century earlier had complained, in an age too late. The time seemed verging towards the sunset, if it were not even that later hour when the dusk is washed with silver. The hour he thought too late was in fact too early. He was one of the pioneers in a world of unexplored riches, one of the first formative influences towards that great renaissance of poetry which came a generation after his death, one of the earliest of the classicists to catch a glimpse, as though from a mountain summit, of all the realms of poetry outside of the classical tradition. The Middle Ages were just beginning to disclose their half-forgotten treasures. Teutonic, Scandinavian, Celtic poetry were an unexplored field. The East only revealed itself much later. For that age, whole tracts of poetry were as though they did not exist ; it did not know of the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Nibelungenlied*, of the *Shah-nameh*, the *Mahâbhârata*, the *Moallakat*. Gray's Ode just hints at obscure or distant fields of poetry, outlying provinces of the immeasurable Republic. His glance ranges over shaggy forms beyond the Arctic Circle, feather-cinctured chiefs of the tropics, denizens of the boundless forests of great continents, where the progress of Poesy, like that of sunlight round the spinning globe, has lifted a flame over the horizon of remote races, the Araucanian or Mexican,

the Lett or the Finn. As the limits of space set to the progress of poetry have extended, those of time have received no less immense an expansion in both directions. The Homeric poems were then regarded as a sort of miraculous birth, the first egg hatched out of Night and Chaos, not, as we now know them to be, the consummate product of an ancient civilization, and steeped in the dying splendours of pre-Hellenic Greece. A hundred and fifty years of more modern progress have enlarged the records of poetry not less by fresh creation than by rediscovery. They have given whole schools of distinguished poets to France, Germany, Italy; in England itself they have been prolific beyond all past experience. Amid all this wealth of material, it is not the least onerous or least important of the functions of an expounder to follow, and if possible to induce others to follow, the strong central clue; to disengage, if he can be so adroit, and to commend, if he can be so persuasive, the one thing essential—the best.

Even within this limit the choice alike of method and subject is endless. The founder of the Chair did not in any way prescribe the scope of its teaching—whether that even then he felt that no limit existed, or that he surmised that the progress of poetry was like that of the world itself, or, more probably, because it never occurred to him that it could pass beyond the study of the poets then recognized as classic, and the detailed application of the rules laid down, as was thought, by Aristotle, and commented on by Horace and Scaliger. The framers of the statute by which the founder's will took effect showed a like wide-mindedness or a like absence of prevision. Perhaps, by the unique tenure they gave to the Chair



when they vested the appointment to it not in any individual or in any lesser corporation, but in the whole legislative body of the University, they may have desired to indicate that poetry was, even more fully than other human studies, co-extensive with the whole republic of letters. But the history of the Chair, so far as it can be traced through imperfect records, shows that the most varying interpretations have been placed by its occupants on the scope of their duties.

Henry Birkhead, the founder, though he is regularly mentioned in the Bidding Prayer of the University, it is nevertheless permissible to call an almost forgotten name. Of him I hope to have a fuller opportunity of speaking later; for among the duties of the Professor of Poetry some return of piety towards the pious founder is more than ever appropriate when the foundation which we owe to his beneficence reaches, as it is now nearly approaching, its two-hundredth anniversary. In the absence of any specific knowledge of his intentions we have a record of his acquirements and tastes. The terse note of Anthony Wood describes him as 'an excellent Latin poet, a good Grecian, and well vers'd in all human learning'; a character which two centuries ago approached pretty near the canon of literary perfection, and which even now seems to hold its own fairly well against a severer competition. But it is perhaps rather to the record of the first Professor elected to the Chair that we should look for an indication of what its founders meant.

A study of the life and works of Joseph Trapp, Professor of Poetry from 1708 to 1718, is instructive in more than one way. It leaves one with mixed feelings, perhaps on the whole rather of a chastening

than a stimulating nature. That he was before all else a Tory and a High Churchman is only what was inevitable in any one chosen for preferment by the University of Oxford in the reign of Anne. That he devoted many years to Virgil as a student, translator, and commentator is a quality also characteristic of that age, but still honourable in this. Trapp's *Virgil* has indeed long since sunk out of sight. It was becoming obsolete in the days of our great-grandfathers; and an oblivion as complete has descended upon the translation of *Paradise Lost* into Latin verse which was his occupation or amusement for many years. His name has chiefly been handed down to posterity by the cruel immortality of an epigram, that stinging line which couples him with Bubb, Stubb, Grubb, and Crabb as the foremost names in the choir of Oxford Muses. He deserves, if he has hardly secured, a kindlier remembrance as the author of a work once widely read and furiously controverted—*Four Discourses on the Nature, Folly, Sin, and Danger of being Righteous Overmuch*.

Two volumes of Prelections delivered by him as Professor were published during his tenure of the Chair. They were reprinted twenty years later, and seem therefore for about a generation to have had vogue as an established textbook: it may be noted as confirming this view, that of the two Professors who next succeeded him, there is said to be no record of the lectures of the first, and no reason to believe that the second ever lectured at all. Trapp's own work is a compendium of the received doctrines of the orthodox classicist school, chiefly borrowed from what the elder Vossius and the two Daciers had built on the foundation of Scaliger's *Poetics*. It draws its illustrations mainly from the Latin poets, and seldom rises beyond



the mere technology of poetry. He hardly contemplates English poetry either as a great literature or as a living art. There are a few cursory allusions to contemporary poets, and to some of an earlier time, Cowley, Dryden, Spenser (whose name Trapp apparently could not spell), and Milton. Shakespeare is once mentioned; and it is reassuring to find that Trapp allows the tragedies of that author much merit. The best which can be said of Trapp on the evidence of his lectures is that he was an industrious and unpretentious writer, well equipped with the ordinary scholarship of his time, and capable of writing an easy, undistinguished, but not inelegant Latin. But as to his fitness for the office, any successor of his must read, with feelings in which pride will scarcely predominate, the few but choice words in which he and his appointment are commented upon by Thomas Hearne. Hearne was not an unprejudiced critic. But there is every mark of candour in the note in his diary that, on the 14th of July, 1708, under a statute passed the week before, 'Mr. Trapp of Wadham Coll. a most ingenious honest Gent. and everyways deserving of y<sup>e</sup> place (he being also but in mean circumstances), was chosen without any opposition, to the great satisfaction of the whole University'. It is true that a little later he describes him as 'somewhat given to cringing', and later still, owing to a difference of opinion on the Non-juror question, accuses him of having 'shew'd himself to be a most silly, empty, rash, hott-headed Fellow, to have no regard to Integrity nor Gratitude'. For a more damaging and even a briefer judgement, we have to turn to a greater critic. This was one to whom Trapp's politics were completely accordant. But no such consideration ever deflected the insight or checked the pen

of Swift. Writing to Stella on the evening of the 17th of March, 1712, after having dined with the Professor of Poetry, and sat with him till seven o'clock, he sums him up in four words: 'Trapp is a coxcomb'. Hardly an encouragement, except in so far as they may be thought to hold up to Trapp's successors a not wholly unapproachable standard, these words are at least a salutary warning.

The progress of poetry as a vital element in the thought and life of a nation, or of the whole race, is followed, at a suitable distance, by the progress of poetical criticism. In this ill-defined department of letters it is possible to trace, not indeed the organic evolution of poetry itself, but the form in which it has from time to time reflected the current trend of interest or opinion. Throughout the eighteenth century the canons of poetry were generally taken for granted; and it is not surprising that, until new poets had revolutionized the art, little if any progress was made towards any new appreciation of poetry, and little fresh ground broken except in exploration and research. Of the better-known holders of this Chair, Spence represents an age in which the poetical impulse was languid, and interest was concentrated on the province of the biographer or scholiast. Lowth, a name still familiar among Biblical commentators, stands out as having, by his celebrated course of lectures *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, done notable service to the appreciation of the Old Testament and of Oriental poetry. Warton marks a further stage of progress. He is remembered now as an historian of poetry rather than as a poet. But it was a reawakened sense of poetry that aroused in him a fresh impulse towards the study of its history. If he was the successor of Whitehead and the pre-



decessor of Pye in the Laureateship, that was a misfortune he could hardly help; and it should not be forgotten that Wordsworth spoke of him as a poet with high admiration, and even with a gratitude of which he was by no means lavish. Of the rest of the series—Warton the elder, Whitfield, Hawkins, Wheeler, Randolph, Holmes, Hurdis—such slender claim as they have to remembrance is not based on any serious contribution made by them, in or out of this Chair, to the art of poetry or to its interpretation.

With the opening of the nineteenth century the stirrings of a new life become manifest. For the first half of it indeed the Professor of Poetry remained trammelled by the supposed necessity of writing in Latin on a subject which refused to be confined within such limits, and in which the Latin impulse was for the time exhausted. It is curious, and to a believer in a classical education a little disconcerting, to find a professor of poetry in England only making timid allusions to the poets of his own country, and speaking of himself as precluded from quoting them. The courses of lectures of this period do indeed show, in such titles as *De Poeticae Vi Medica* and *De Rei Poeticae Idea*, a continuous tendency to follow the expansion which had taken place in poetry itself. But not until, now nearly fifty years ago, Matthew Arnold broke through that obsolete tradition once for all, could the lecturer on poetry give his subject an adequate and an actual treatment: and it is from 1857, in a sense, that the real history of the Chair begins. Since then its province, as generally understood, has been, not to discuss poetry as a scholastic or grammatical art, nor to set forth the result of search among the documents which bear upon its history, but rather to show it in one

or other of its varied aspects as a function of life. To Trapp (if I may once more for a moment return to him) poetry was one of the arts in what almost might be called the mechanical sense of the word. His inaugural lecture lays down as an axiom, the admitted truth of which explains his presence there at all, that it is an art which, like grammar or rhetoric, can be, and ought to be, taught—*institutionem et admittere et mereri*. Set this beside the address in which, five years ago, my immediate predecessor, with a penetration and a subtlety all his own, dealt with the essential nature and value of poetry, and it is at once plain that, in the common progress of thought, the whole movement of criticism has changed its axis. We profess poetry; but we do not profess to teach it, or to explain, as was once thought possible, how the thing is done.

In that same inaugural lecture—and in it, let me add, we see Trapp at his best—he expresses, not without a certain grace and feeling, the misgivings with which he treads a path where there are no footprints of a predecessor to guide him. The twenty-fourth occupant of a Chair which has existed for close on two centuries may confess to misgivings of a different nature. *Omnia iam volgata*, he may be inclined to say with Virgil; it is all in print; his labour must be in a more than thrice-ploughed field. There are no great unexplored tracts to discover. Texts have been established and made accessible. Research into the documents which bear on the history of poetry has approached its limit. Even its technique—metrical, verbal, constructional—has been studied and commented on to weariness. Regarded as a science, poetry has been analysed and classified. Regarded as an art, it has had its mechanism reduced to rule. Regarded (as the late Master of Balliol



used to say of logic) as neither an art nor a science, but a trick, it has been shown up. Regarded as itself, it remains an invisible thing, a voice, a mystery. That much-laboured field is in truth inexhaustible; no sooner than life itself will poetry give up its whole secret or open out its full meaning. All great poetry, by virtue of its own vitality, remains a living and a quickening force to successive generations; and from one age to another it is the highest function of criticism to disengage and set forth its unimpaired beauty, its fresh significance. Virgil and his age already possessed the whole of the great poetry of Greece, and the interpretation given of it by Greek critics. To the founder and the first occupants of this Chair the Latin poets as well as the Greek were ancient classics. But the last word on Homer had not been said in the time of Virgil, nor the last word on Virgil in the reign of her late Majesty Queen Anne. The last word has not been said on either now. To every new reader the oldest classic comes as a new poet. The progress of poesy is perpetually beginning afresh. Up to the present day the Greek and Latin poets, though they have been for so many ages a closed roll, have constantly required and received new study, have borne to every age a separate and a new message; nor will the time ever come when Homer and Virgil will cease to demand the highest interpretative skill. The words of Pindar which Gray prefixed to his Ode, *φωνᾶντα συνετοῖσιν*, are true of all poetry: it is only to an answering intelligence that poetry conveys its meaning; and it is equally true, as Pindar goes on, that poetry is a language which differs from that of common usage, and always requires interpreters. This is so with the poets to whom we give the name of classical in its narrower sense. Still more

is it so with the whole of poetry, not as the product of single languages and selected ages, but as the expression, in every age and country, of all that gives impulse, joy, meaning to human life.

Gray was regarded, by those who were admitted to his intimacy, as the most learned man in England, if not in Europe. He was probably, both by temper and acquirement, the finest critic of his time. Alone, or almost alone, in that age he had penetrated to the inmost spirit of Greek literature. Alone, or almost alone, he understood and appreciated the Middle Ages. His knowledge of English poetry up to his own time was immense, and his judgement upon it all but faultless. But he did not, in the Ode or elsewhere, anticipate its splendid future. His great constellations are in the past. Overhead lay a space of sky which, but for the single, large, clear brilliance of Pope, was almost bare of stars. That dimness was the morning twilight.

The nightingale had ceased, and a few stars  
Were lingering in the heavens, while the thrush  
Began calm-throated.

Three months after the Ode was published the new day began with Blake. Before Gray died Wordsworth was born.

We seem now to live at the end of that splendid age of poetry which was beginning then. Urania speaks with darkened brow. The Abbey church at Westminster, or quieter graves by the Thames between source and sea, hold the dust of all but one of the great Victorian poets. Our own contemporaries are the After-born; a list, as in the heroic cycle of Greece, variously made up of uncertain, and in some cases obscure, names. But the coming of a new age of poetry, like the birth of a new poet, cannot be foreseen.



Predictions are generally wrong. Sometimes it turns out that, in the words of one of our own living poets, *the bird we hailed as the lark sang in her sleep in the dark, and the song we took for a token bore false witness of dawn*. More often the real dawn comes unsuspected. The stars wane, and we think it is because a film has passed across them. The faint shiver has run over the sky, and we missed it. Only afterwards, and looking backward, can we see what was at the time an imperceptible difference:

As is the difference betwixt day and night  
The hour before the heavenly-harnessed team  
Begins his golden progress in the East.

Like the attempt to predict the progress of poetry, like the attempt to teach its practice, the attempt to define its essence is futile. Such conceptions belong to a scheme of thought based on the idea of a finite machine-made world. Once this conception has given way, as it has done or is doing in every province of human thought, to that of an organic vital process moving under the control of laws which are themselves vital, organic, progressive, the question of defining poetry, either from abstract principles or by induction of instances, becomes almost meaningless. We do not now profess to define poetry any more than we profess to teach it. All attempts to do so have obviously come short; and in no case would I venture to add another failure to the list, and so to demonstrate, at once and for all, my unfitness for this Chair. But if poetry be, as it is, the highest expression of the essential truth of things; if it have, as it has, the power ascribed to it in Gray's Ode, to control care and passion, to solace or dispel the ills of life, to accompany and inspire all high impulse, all noble

effort, all profound emotion, it will no more require a definition than an apology. Rather I might quote from the long series of tributes that have been paid to it by the masters of human thought. But even this would be a tedious, and here at least a superfluous chronicle. They are but variations on the words spoken *urbi et orbi* in the Roman Forum by the most copious and versatile master of language in the Graeco-Latin world. In that noble defence of poetry he claimed for it a field unrestricted in space or time, a sway over youth and age, a homage from the statesman, the scholar, the citizen. *Ceterae neque temporum sunt, neque aetatum omnium neque locorum: haec studia adolescentiam agunt, senectutem oblectant: nos, instituti rebus optimis, non poetarum voce moveamur?*

Like some passage from one of the great poets themselves, these words of Cicero come home in their full weight of meaning to those who have had experience of life, over whom many years have passed since they felt poetry in its first power and its earliest charm. For the progress of poetry is in the individual life no less than in the life of the nation or of the race. It does not mean the same thing to us at intervals of years. The guide of youth, the solace of age it certainly is, even if to the end of life it remains a kindling force, even if it helps the young also to dispel or surmount their troubles. Those are happy for whom throughout middle age it mingles both qualities. As many men are poets in their youth, so still more are in their youth lovers of poetry; but its progress and theirs are on rapidly and often on irretrievably diverging paths. In the cave into which, according to the too familiar Platonic allegory, we have all to descend, we are apt to forget the daylight, even



to lose the use of our sight, and when released from it, to look blankly and without comprehension at the upper world. It is not to be wondered at if the Muse turns, upon those who have forgotten her, austere lineaments and unregarding eyes.

The title of Gray's Ode was borrowed by the most illustrious of my predecessors as the title of a brief poem of his own; one of the most dismal of English lyrics, which brings before us in its full horror the meaning which may be attached to his doctrine that poetry is a criticism of life. *Youth strikes the rock and finds the vein*—you will remember the verses. Where the bright water gushed out unsought at a casual touch, the mature man spends his life in laboriously excavating a channel. But the sacred stream has run off and vanished. Age and death come to him as he rakes feebly among the stones in search of it. The channel is dry, the hill of the Muses mute.

A maturity so wasted would naturally lead to so wretched an old age. But the verses may be regarded as the expression of a petulant mood rather than of a settled belief. In a more humane and more normal temper Arnold would surely have been the first to sustain, as he has elsewhere sustained with persuasive eloquence, the higher appreciation, the deeper love of poetry that comes with matured judgement. In its twofold power to stimulate and to solace poetry is capable of abuse as an intoxicant or an opiate. It was in some such light that Plato regarded it when he banished the poets from his Republic. But the fact that this banishment was to be total, and not confined to excluding them from the life of the younger citizens, shows that Plato regarded poetry as an influence which did not affect men in youth only, and to which they

normally remained, whether for good or harm, fully sensitive. The power of poetry over the mind, the response of the mind to poetry, did not cease with years. If it were otherwise, the wisdom of this University might be impeached for not setting an age-limit, and an early one, to the tenure of this Chair. 'Too old at forty' might be a test of fitness as justifiable as it would be severe. And indeed it is a singular fact that for long some such rule, for whatever reason, seems to have been tacitly followed. For more than a hundred years the average age of those elected to the Chair did not exceed thirty: Keble, the fifteenth in the list, was the first who was over thirty-five. In more recent times this rule, if it can be called a rule, has been habitually set aside. The University has confined itself to requiring, as regards the age of a Professor of Poetry, merely what was required by the Rector of a Norfolk parish (who is, I am glad to say, still living) when he advertised for a curate: that he shall neither be so young as to be omniscient, nor so old as to be unteachable.

Those of us who were once young here, among the gardens and rivers of Oxford, do not need to be reminded of what time takes away. We look back, not without a certain wistfulness, on those golden hours in which poetry first revealed itself to us, in the irrecoverable splendour of dawn. But the light of day comes from the same source as the light of morning; and the best in poetry always remains the best. If we regard the great poets with different eyes, and look to them for different qualities, if their power and function seem to alter in the progress of our own life, that is only another way of saying that their own greatness is many-faceted; that there is more in them than any



one reader, at any one stage of experience, can fully appreciate. Where the form and substance of poetry are one—and that is, where poetry is most itself—even the distinction often drawn between its form and substance as they affect us at successive periods of life tends to disappear. In earlier years the sensuous delight in melody of words and beauty of metres may be stronger, and we may afterwards turn more to poetry for what it contains or reveals of deeper import. Something of the same change passes over the feeling for poetry as that change in the feeling for Nature described by Wordsworth in the *Lines composed near Tintern Abbey*. That change, too, is progress. Something, alas! passes over many which passed over Wordsworth also, but on which he does not philosophize, because he remained unconscious of it through his whole life. It is not that their feeling for poetry is transferred to other poets, or passes to other elements in poetry; but that the faculty in them which feels poetry ceases to exist. Their taste does not deteriorate. They do not prefer worse poetry where once they preferred better. They may, on the contrary, approach nearer and nearer to orthodoxy of profession. But the root of the matter has withered in them. That change, too, is progress—of a kind.

Nature herself has provided that the outward and inward, the earlier and later charm of poetry co-exist at their highest power in the great poets. The elasticity and poise of Homer's verse, the golden Virgilian hexameter, the organ-music rolled out by Milton when—

His volant touch

Instinct through all proportions low and high

Fled and pursued transverse the resonant fugue,

not only correspond to, but interpret and make incar-

nate to the senses, inner qualities of substance equally incomparable. So too it is with poetry in its more fragile and ethereal forms. A lyric that first enraptured us by some verbal or musical charm of language set deeper strings vibrating in us : only by long listening do we catch the full harmonies : but the harp and the harp-player are the same at last that they were at first. If this common ground is held with regard to the great poets, difference of opinion matters less as regards the poetry which matters less itself. Youth often fixes its impetuous and transitory affections on objects that in the light of deeper eyes, even if those eyes are its own, will seem unworthy. It was not for their unworthiness that it loved them. Some soul of poetry in them was alive and awoke the answering thrill. Seeing the effects they produce, we are precluded from dismissing them as illusions. We may say of them, in the words of the wise and gentle Centaur who taught poetry to Achilles:

Siete voi accorti  
Che quel di retro move ciò ch' ei tocca?  
Così non soglion fare i piè dei morti.

The highest object of the critical faculty, it cannot be too often repeated, is not to censure faults, but to disengage excellences. Those who, perhaps with some loss of the earlier sensitiveness and receptiveness, have attained a maturer judgement, often look on new poets or new tastes in poetry with uneasy dismay. They lament, as so many generations before them have lamented, as so many more will no doubt go on lamenting until the end of time, what seems to them the perversion or decline of taste. Yet the truth oftener is that youth, an unconscious but instinctive critic, has disengaged and assimilated some excellence



in the new poet, some progress made by poetry under the new method, which has escaped wiser, or at least more trained eyes. No one, looking back, ever really regrets one of his own young enthusiasms. It is the enthusiasms we did not have that we regret. Why then should we deplore those of others, however unaccountable we may think them? Soon enough these young revolutionaries will find themselves defending their own classics against a still younger generation, to whom they in their turn will be reactionary, obsolete, academic. But all the while for them, as for us, moving high overhead in their silent progress, lordly as at the first day, unobscured by the dust of praise or blame, the immortal lights shine.

Of the poets of England for the last three centuries Oxford can claim a full share. We cannot indeed match the dazzling roll of names which adorn the records of the sister University. But the list which begins with Sir Philip Sidney would be memorable, even if it did not include in Shelley the one name which can be set beside those of Sappho and Catullus, and even if Browning were excluded from it as only a son of Oxford by adoption. There are other poets too with whom Oxford may claim a connexion even slighter than that involved in having formally adopted them, or formally expelled them. The most magnificent compliment ever paid to the University of Oxford was unfortunately paid to her at the expense of Cambridge; and good taste, or at least good feeling, perhaps forbids me to quote the famous lines which would alone suffice to establish the supremacy of (Dryden as a master of stately language and gorgeous rhythm) Wordsworth, in lines as familiar and almost as splendid, has recorded

the powerful impression made on him by Oxford when he visited it in the summer of 1820. Near a score of years were still to pass before Oxford could bring herself to give him public honour ; and it was an admiration not biased by any feelings of personal gratitude which drew from him the expression of a wish that he might have been among her sons. A little earlier Oxford was, for one memorable month, the home of a poet who gathered his greener laurels from even a loftier bough. It was here, in the hospitality of Magdalen Hall, then under sentence of expropriation, that the third book of *Endymion* was written in the Long Vacation of 1817 ; to that extent, and to no more, can Oxford associate itself with the name of Keats.

In the history and criticism of poetry in England the share of Oxford has been no less important. Of Warton I have already spoken. With his name are intimately connected those of two contemporaries, Percy of Christ Church, who more than any other single person may be called the originator of the Renaissance of Poetry in modern England, and Johnson of Pembroke (for such we may call him here), whose *Lives of the English Poets* are still one of the classics of our literature. To Matthew Arnold, not only an Oxford poet, but in a special and unique sense the poet of Oxford, the singular distinction belongs of an eminence in poetry and in criticism such as rarely if ever has been combined, though other poets of that generation have been fine critics, and other critics have some claim to consideration as poets. Of these last, I would not pass over without one word of remembrance my friend Francis Palgrave, whose *Golden Treasury* has been for forty-five years a gateway into poetry for tens of thousands of readers, and whose common daily talk, even more



than his lectures or published writings, showed the tone of one whose habitual commerce was with the great masters. These are but a few names out of many which might be recalled. But they are sufficient to indicate the magnitude and splendour of the tradition which surrounds us, and to ensure that no one called to fill this Chair can approach it with any slight sense of his responsibility. I have to beg for a large indulgence wherever I fall short of what is worthy of the record of my predecessors, or of the name of this University ; and most of all, wherever I fall short, as I needs must do, of what is worthy of poetry itself, or where any words of mine may tend, through weakness or error, to impair its majesty or impede its progress.











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